

“The Face is the Mirror of the Soul...” Part I  
By Susan Inteman, M.A., LPC, BCIA-C

Researchers have known for centuries that facial expressions are crucial to social interactions and have categorized them in great detail. They have identified those expressions which are universal and can distinguish even slight differences in expression.

When I was 9 months old my parents discovered a lump on the left side of my neck about the size of a nickel. What was to be a simple surgical procedure to remove the lump was diagnosed as a tumor. The tumor was completely removed after many hours in surgery but it had been wrapped around my seventh cranial nerve (motor nerve to the face) and there were complications - I was now completely paralyzed on the left side of my face and all movement was lost there.

So, at a very young age, my journey began which involved many things. It included me being teased as a child and then adapting to my condition, several micro-neuro reconstructive surgeries, physical therapy, psychotherapy for anxiety and, finally, venturing into alternative and complementary medicine. The latter, which was one of the most important aspects of my recovery from physical and mental trauma, as well as the neuro muscular re-education following my long and arduous surgical procedures which was another important aspect of my recovery. At this time, the mind/body connection began to play a crucial role in my life.

There is an inner strength that can very well become part of one's being when attempting to deal with adversity. This knowledge, throughout my life has led me, as a counselor, to begin a counseling session, by telling a patient, “Never to let anyone tell you, you haven't come a long way unless they know from whence you came.” I do this more often than not in the treatment of chronic pain and illness.

On my personal journey many of the surgical procedures (which began at age 30) lasted for 15-17 hours. These surgeries were mainly done under general anesthesia with several procedures being done under local IV sedation. As with any extensive surgery of this nature, my hospital stays were usually 5-10 days with a minimum of 2 days in Neuro ICU.

Following my third procedure I began to experience high levels of anxiety both prior to and after the surgery. This developed into anxiety with panic disorder and agoraphobia. Of course, being of strong character and, indeed a very willful child, I had a good dose of denial. I remember getting my first preliminary diagnosis by a young psychiatric nurse at Cape Fear Memorial Hospital on the way to the beach. My symptoms were typical of a panic attack and I remember her asking me what my life was currently like. So after rattling off surgeries, Grad School, a demanding job and my mother's heart attack, I was given complete cardiac examination. Everything was OK and, after taking Ativan, my symptoms began to dissipate. Her suggestion of my possibly having an anxiety disorder, didn't mesh well with my head strong personality. My response was that it is impossible because I have been in the counseling filed on and off for most of my life. She said it's makes as much sense as that because her father is a cardiologist it would be impossible for him to have a heart attack – good point. However, before seeking help my anxiety disorder worsened and I also developed PTSD, probably associated with the surgeries. I found a wonderful therapist and EMDR and EFT became a valuable tool for both she and I. At

that time I also took one of the first graduate classes offered by UNC Chapel Hill Integrative Medicine Department in mindfulness as well as learning T'ai Chi Chih. To this day, almost 12 years after my last major surgery, I still practice Mindfulness and am a T'ai Chi Chih Instructor.

In 2005 I went into private practice as a Licensed Professional Counselor in Raleigh NC. My focus is Chronic Pain and Illness using a multidisciplinary approach with what is a very multifaceted issue.

In the next issue of the Newsletter I will tell you about my fascinating introduction to Biofeedback.